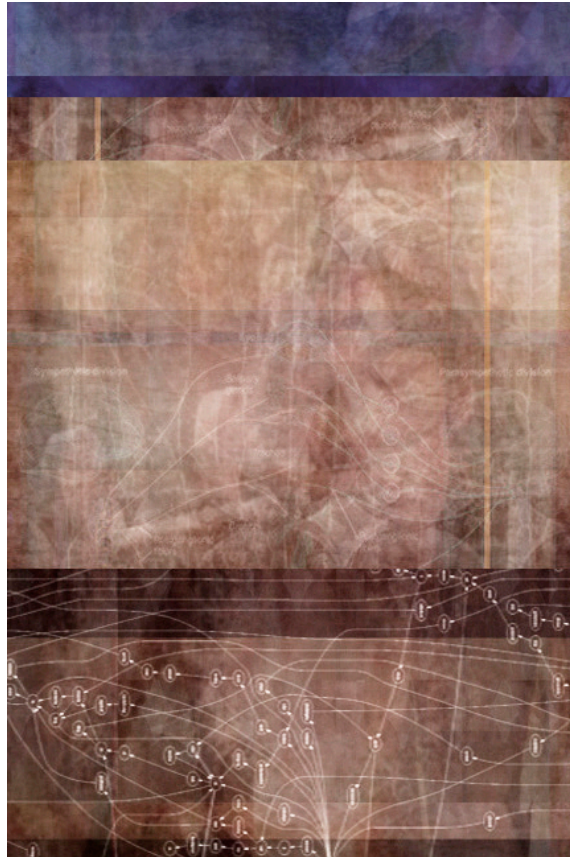


On Nietzsche and the Odyssey Palimpsest

by Joseph Nechvatal

Draft of *Aesthetic States of Frenzy: Nietzsche's Aesthetic Palimpsest* written in 2016 for Dan Mellamphy & Nandita Biswas Mellamphy (eds.) *The Digital Dionysus*, pp. 218-235, Chapter 14



Joseph Nechvatal, *drifting telemachus* (2014) 44 x 66"

For Nietzsche, the aesthetic state is an altered state of consciousness achieved through an artistic transcendental aesthetic. This aesthetic is the highest form of human activity, because in certain works of art opposites are conjoined. And it is through the majesty of such conjoined art that we find an optimistic path out of nihilism and towards our own aggrandizement. So we artists and thinkers need Nietzsche now more than ever - because there is so much to be nihilistic about in our mad and tragic world. Consequently, I am interested in Nietzschean tragic aesthetic when Nietzsche emphasizes affective states – states of mind/body that we may enter into as a form of creative expression of our will to power in art.

Today the meeting of neurasthenics and information technology is one of the vital and pleasurable arenas in which interesting currents align for art. My endeavor here shall be to give evidence of this pleasurable meeting through my recent meshwork series called *Odyssey Palimpsest* – work that returns us symbolically to Homer's ancient lost hero. I will place this somewhat odd *Odyssey* in relationship to Nietzsche's affirmation of life and in line with his development of the tragic hero in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). His doctrine of tragedy is based in the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of false individuation may be broken in the interests of a consciousness of restored oneness. Thus it is an affirmation of the mystery of everything.

Odyssey Palimpsest is a highly elaborated ornamental scene sequence that embodies primordial joyful frenzy and primordial pain. The lyric poet that you will see in *Odyssey Palimpsest* identifies himself with the pain of the world and merges into the unification of the world. But perhaps it is necessary to comment briefly on two of Nietzsche's well-known aesthetic formulations: Dionysus (the god of intoxication, orgies, forces of nature and music) and Apollo (god of individuation, illusion, form and order). This use of the concepts of the Apollonian and Dionysian is famously linked to Nietzsche where he wants to bring to our attention the way in which the development of art is bound up with the duality of the Apollonian and Dionysian. As you know, Nietzsche's aesthetic usage of these concepts, which was later developed philosophically, first appeared in *The Birth of Tragedy*. His premise there was that the fusion of Dionysian and Apollonian artistic impulses are needed to form artistic tragedies. It is through a dialectical interplay of these two opposing - and at the same time complementary - aesthetic elements that my art owes its continuous allegiance to Nietzsche.

Nietzsche famously assimilated the Apollonian and the Dionysian together under the name of an *experience* of art. *Odyssey Palimpsest* attempts an equivalent, as it fuses chaotic disturbance with classical beautiful forms. It is an attempt at situating us somewhere between the surface of empirical diverse reality and the chasm of shattering incoherence where we must each pick through the meshwork and recover figurative meaning out of entangled ground. This approach relates to my book *Immersion Into Noise* (2011) where I have mapped out a broad-spectrum of aesthetic activity I call the *art of noise* by tracing its past eruptions where figure/ground merge and flip the common emphasis to some extent. *Immersion Into Noise* concludes with a look at the figural aspect of this aesthetic lodged within the ground of consciousness itself.

In brief, noise art aesthetics is an unbound zone (where qualitative shifts of coordinates take place) in which it is possible to carry out art experiments that would be unachievable in a different place. What noise art aesthetics has to offer is the possibility to understand things in a different way, shifting boundaries, departing from established functions.

My project *Odyssey Palimpsest* is situated in my immersive noise theory of turmoil exchanges of figure/ground relationships: an agile art that emphasizes human and non-human entanglements. This is an art that depends on playing out nihilistic negativity by intensifying its forces into an affirmative nihilism. This nimble nihilist bracketing pushes us towards open de-familiarizations, challenging us to think outside of the normal system of human consciousness. So *Odyssey Palimpsest* as nimble frenzy is implicated in the very type of problematic instability that the 'self' undergoes in Nietzsche's thought: the cohesiveness of the culture/state distinction, like the cohesiveness of the 'self/other' distinction disintegrates with the ontological instability produced by the annihilation of the real as distinguishable from the illusory. With a nimble art of noise - based in the distinction between active nihilism and passive nihilism (or monstrous nihilism) - *Odyssey Palimpsest* can depict the underground vigor of form as an active verve that can only be speculated at by thinking beyond the discursive. And that enacts a shift away from the subject/object dualism that is currently much lauded by Object-Oriented Ontologists.

The embeddedness of our inner world - the life of our imagination with its intense drives, suspicions, fears, and loves - guides our intentions and actions in the political-economic world. Our inner world is the only true source of meaning and purpose we have and exquisite frenzy-gazing (that involves self-investigation) is the way to discover for ourselves this inner life. So we might consider now that, in contrast to our frenzied data market surveillance culture that which trains us to fear the atrocious eyes of outer perception, a protracted gazing art practice based in absorption could encourage the development of agile clandestine exchanges based on the embedded individual intuitive eye in conjunctive contact with abundant optical-mnemonic commons (not cloud) that shares a sensibility for building a defensive force.

Let's consider the difference between noise art (based on an individual's inner vision) versus the monstrous mass machine data market, with its digital functionalism. For me the difference is in looking *into* and projecting *onto* something - thereby discovering an emerging manifestation based in invisibility - as opposed to looking *at* something. In that sense it requires an active slow participation on the part of the viewer - and the noise style of *Odyssey Palimpsest* demands as much. For me this requires use of hidden mental participation and, as such, is now essential in our climate of monstrous mass media (mass-think) in that it plays against the grain of given objective consensus visibility. In that sense *Odyssey Palimpsest* is more like a service product (or a server).

However, my main interest in invisibility with *Odyssey Palimpsest* lay in a texture of emerging claims of art-as-politics - with its emphasis on the production of individuality based in a political physiology (a political function of living systems) with a strong proposition of emergence as the key aspect. So, I will continue the work done in *Immersion Into Noise* by looking at the art of noise as an emergent property

rooted in obscurity. This comparison relates to my palimpsest work as an indeterminacy-based noise artist.

Noise aesthetics is a complex and ambiguous political gazing, and its theory of an art of resistance and investigation would be increasingly valuable to an analytical social movement based on skepticism while undermining monstrous market predictabilities, as it strengthens unique personal powers of imagination and critical thinking. This is so as it counters the effects of our age of simplification: effects which have resulted from the glut of consumer oriented entertainment messages and political propaganda which the monstrous mass media feeds us daily in the interests of corporate profit and governmental psychological manipulations.

There are now many artists who see the symbolic and metaphorical dimension of a work as of little importance. I am not one of them. For me, the real worth of vigorous contemporary art is in its ability to deliver to the commons excessive sensually-embodied implications. As noise art aesthetics are indistinguishable from that which it produces as *Odyssey Palimpsest*, it might be considered as a panpsychic²⁹ sphere that contains systems of chance operations within it.

So, as you can see, for *Odyssey Palimpsest* I eagerly identified with Nietzsche's Dionysian attention to the frantic painful beauty of primal unity. For as he wrote, "The brightest clarity of the image did not suffice us, for this seemed just as much to reveal something as to conceal something." My urge with *Odyssey Palimpsest* has been, in his words, to "tear the veil and to uncover the mysterious background" of life through the powerful analogy of art.

Such a Dionysian approach to art includes the notions that *The Birth of Tragedy* emphasizes in its title - *eternal recurrence* - and the realization of "the eternal joy of becoming" that is the creative act.